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ABSTRACT

A methodology for conducting research on managing the disruptive student based on identifying successful teacher strategies is described. The subjects of this study were teachers selected as being outstanding or average in their ability to cope with behavior problems. Data collection included two half-day classroom observations, a structured interview in which each teacher responded to a series of written vignettes depicting student behavior problems, and an open-ended interview in which the teacher discussed general strategies for dealing with each of 12 types of problem behaviors. Preliminary analyses of the data indicated that student disobedience and disruptive behavior provoke more intense and less effective teacher responses than do instructional problems. Also significant differences and responses to problems seem to favor teachers who view themselves as both instructors and socializers over those who view themselves as just instructors. (JD)

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INVESTIGATING TEACHER STRATEGIES

WITH PROBLEM STUDENTS

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Classroom Strategy Study: Investigating Teacher Strategies with Problem Students[1]

Mary M. Rohrkemper and Jere E. Brophy[2]

The focus of IRT's Classroom Strategy Study is the identification and elaboration of successful strategies that teachers use with difficult or troublesome students.

In the summer of 1976, a group of teachers associated with the Institute met with IRT researchers and discussed their classroom concerns and beliefs about what educational researchers ought to be looking at inside the classroom. The topic most frequently mentioned was the "problem" student. Teachers expressed real concern and frustration in trying to handle these students. It was the task of the Classroom Strategy Study to translate teachers' concerns into a researchable effort.

The first year was spent transforming a list of approximately 60 teacher descriptions of problem students into 12 conceptually distinct types. These 12 types include instructional concerns (failure syndrome, perfectionist, underachiever, and low achiever), activity/attention issues (hyperactivity, short attention span, and immature), aggression problems (hostile aggressive, passive aggressive, and defiant) and peer relationship difficulties (rejected by peers, and shy/withdrawn). These

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[1]Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 1979, as part of the symposium "Perspectives on classroom management research."

[2]Mary M. Rohrkemper is a research intern and project manager of IRT's Classroom Strategy Study. Jere E. Brophy is coordinator of that study and a professor of teacher education and educational psychology.

12 types of problem behavior are mutually exclusive, although a child may exhibit more than a single problem.

Several alternative data collection approaches were considered.

First was extensive (and intense) year-long classroom observation in many classrooms. This idea was rejected for several reasons. One was the prohibitive cost of such an approach. More importantly, however, classroom observation seemed neither efficient nor sufficient. Critical incidences are relatively infrequent and do not all occur in the classroom, and teacher strategies with difficult students are not necessarily public. Much is done privately in the hall, after school, or on the phone with parents. The presence of an observer at these times could seriously alter the behavior of the teacher or student.

A second approach considered, and piloted, was intensive open-ended interviews with teachers about problem students in their classrooms. This method yielded rich descriptions of unique case studies. These "thick descriptions" were fascinating and worthy of individual study, but they did not readily lend themselves to analysis. They were too unique to allow comparison across teachers and types of students, and thus did not address the major question: What strategies "work" with certain types of problem students? What we needed was a common stimulus for the teachers, to both focus attention and facilitate data aggregation and analysis.

The third method considered, and ultimately adopted, involved presenting teachers with common stimuli to focus them on the same behavior problems, but at the same time allowing them to respond freely and at length. This method allows for analysis of teacher strategies that can both capture common themes and highlight unique contributions.

Specifically, the method we finally adopted involved a sample of

elementary school teachers, located in either Lansing or inner-city Detroit, and rated by their principals as either outstanding or average in their ability to handle difficult students. Principals were asked to nominate their truly outstanding teachers and their average teachers from among those with at least three years of experience. We stressed that we were not interested in teachers who were unable to cope in the classroom, because such teachers would be unable to tell us what we wanted to know. The sample allows for statistical comparisons by grade, location of school (Lansing vs. inner-city Detroit), and teacher expertise (outstanding vs. average).

Data were collected from nominated teachers who agreed to participate by research assistants unaware of the teachers' group nominations. Data collection included two half-day classroom observations, a structured interview in which each teacher responded to a series of written vignettes depicting student behavior problems, and an open-ended interview in which the teacher discussed general strategies for dealing with each of the 12 types of problem behaviors.

The first phase of data collection -- the two half-day classroom observations -- served two primary functions. First, it allowed the observer to note the teacher's general approach to, and degree of success at, classroom management, thus providing background for interpreting the subsequent interviews and a cross check on the principal's nomination. Second, the observer was able to record the details of any "relevant incidents" in which the teacher had to deal with one of the 12 problem types under study. After the observations were completed, the research assistant rated the teacher on a series of high-inference scales measuring variables such as warmth, monitoring of the classroom, apparent preparation, and tolerance for disruption. In addition, the observer also answered

a series of questions regarding the physical features of the classroom, the teacher's typical response to student misbehavior, types of classroom distractions, and so on. Finally, the observers indicated which category they felt the teacher should be in: outstanding or average.

The second phase of data collection focused on the vignette instrument. There were two vignettes for each of the 12 types to allow for a reliability analysis of the responses to the vignette instrument. The vignettes depict disruptive behavior or other problems that each of the 12 student types typically present in classrooms. Following is an example of the hostile aggressive vignette.

> This morning several students excitedly tell you that on the way to school they saw Tom beating up Sam and taking his lunch money. Tom is the class bully and has done things like this many times.

The students depicted in the vignettes were identified by sex (according to the prevailing base rates for each behavior type), but no other details were included that would type them by age, social class, or other status variables. This deliberate exclusion of extraneous detail allowed for teachers across grade levels K-6 and across the two geographic locations to readily imagine the behavior occurring in their classrooms.

In addition to the 24 standard vignettes, each teacher also responded to two "special vignettes." These vignettes were based on the report of relevant incidents involving student problem behavior observed by the research assistant in the teacher's classroom. Details were masked, both to reduce the likelihood that the teacher would recognize the event and to make the special vignettes conform to the standard vignette form.

These special vignettes were used to assess the degree of congruence between teachers' self-reports and their actual classroom behavior. This helps us to judge the validity of generalizing from the self-report data to actual teacher behavior. In addition to these unique vignettes, we are examining other observed relevant incidents that can be matched to the standard vignettes for additional indexes of reliability of self-report.

The teachers' responses to the vignettes were spontaneous. The teachers saw the vignettes for the first time at the interview and were asked to imagine the situations depicted in the vignette as occurring in their classrooms. This simulated a classroom situation in which teachers are faced with problem behavior for which they have not specifically prepared, but which demands a response. After reading each vignette, the teachers (1) stated their exact words and actions, what they would say and do if this were to occur in their classroom; (2) explained why this would be said and done; and (3) described the student as they would if explaining the incident to a student teacher.

The teachers proceeded in this manner through all 26 vignettes. Then they were given the list of the 12 problem type descriptors and encouraged to think about their experiences and strategies with these types of students prior to the next interview appointment.

In the third and last phase of data collection -- the problem-type interview -- the teachers' responses were thought out in advance and more general than their responses to the vignettes. While the purpose of the vignette phase was to capture the teachers' immediate and specific responses to student behavior, the purpose of the problem type interview was to expand on the strategies they use, to probe the rationales for these strategies, and in general, to discover how the teachers see/cope

with/understand these students. This last interview phase was open-ended, but the teachers were asked to discuss long- versus short-term goals, strategies that have not worked as well as those that have, and factors that might qualify general approaches.

The teachers proceeded through the 12 problem types, addressing each for as long as necessary. Interview length varied considerably, although length did not necessarily correlate with quality. Interviews ranged from two to eight hours, with the average length being approximately four hours.

At the conclusion of the problem-type interview, the teachers were asked a series of questions regarding variables such as availability of teacher aides and school procedures for assigning students to classrooms. Teachers were also asked to fill out a series of forms that concern teacher, school and class demographic data, self-rating of level of success with the different types of students investigated, the amount of recent experience with these types of students, and short descriptions of each type. Finally, the teachers were asked to indicate their relative emphasis on socialization versus instruction in teaching.

All interview tapes were transcribed and are now being read by the project director and manager. Any ambiguities, inconsistencies, or areas where more detail is desired are noted. The research assistant then conducts a follow-up interview based on these questions; any comments that the teacher may wish to add are included as well.

Data collection, now in its second year, is nearly completed. Currently, energy is directed to the development of coding systems that both capture the commonalities and retain the unique qualities of the interview protocols.

Coding is presently focused on the vignette data. A series of systems are in use across all vignettes that range from generalized high-inference variables, to more specific codes for rewards and punishment strategies, to specific lists of the actual rewards and punishments teachers mention. In addition, unique coding systems are being developed which address each vignette individually. Specific elements of strategies are coded, as are the implicit teacher theories regarding the nature of the student behavior in question. These unique coding systems allow in-depth analysis of both immediate and long-term strategies for preventing problem student behavior and for teacher perspectives on the problem student depicted, thereby allowing precise comparisons between the teacher groups for each vignette.

Some preliminary analyses of the data indicate that student social problems (disobedience and disruption) provoke more intense and less effective teacher responses than instructional problems (student failure to respond to, or handle, academic tasks). Also, significant differences in responses to problem types seem to favor teachers who view themselves as both socializers and instructors over those who view themselves as *just* instructors.

The task of our coding and analysis efforts is to critically examine these teacher responses, further identifying the distinctive qualities that arise by type of student behavior. Within this, the primary focus will be to identify commonalities across all teachers in strategies and rationale, and also differences among teachers who differ in management ability, grade level, and school location. The goal of such comparison is to make distinctions among superficially similar strategies, leading to finer discriminations of the elements of successful strategies. Such precision will aid in disseminating these strategies to other teachers, and facilitating their appropriate implementation in the classroom.

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